WASHTENAW HISTORICAL SOCIETY—Founded December 19, 1857

Washtenaw Impressions

NOVEMBER, 1974

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

On November the 27th, the WHS will be celebrating the 117th anniversary of the original call "for a County Convention for the purpose of forming a County Historical Society." It was on the 17th--the third Thursday in December--in 1857 that the convention took place in the old county courthouse and the Washtenaw County Historical Society was founded. On the 19th--the third Thursday in December--in 1974, we'll celebrate our founding with the unveiling of a very special surprise which dates prior to 1857. This is the night of our Christmas party, of course, and I can think of no better occassion to celebrate our "SURPRISE". I am being very mysterious, I know, but our Christmas surprise will thrill everyone who has ever been interested in the history of this area. I hope to see every member and friend of the Historical Society at our 1974 Christmas Party.

Our negotiations for the mill site on Geddes Road are proceeding as scheduled. I will keep you informed on all developments.

CHRISTMAS PARTY DECEMBER 19

Santa is coming to the annual Washtenaw Historical Society Christmas party at 8 p.m. Thursday, December 19, in Liberty Hall, Ann Arbor Federal Savings, Liberty and Division, Ann Arbor. Please bring a small gift to exchange.

CALENDAR

Dexter Historical Society--
8 p.m. Thursday, November 21, at Wylie School Cafeteroium. Slides of historic downtown Ann Arbor buildings by Profs. Kingsbury Marzolf and Gerhard Olving of the University College of Architecture and Design. Bruce Waggoner will show slides of historic Dexter buildings. Program co-sponsored by Dexter Chamber of Commerce. Open to public.

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Saline Historical Society--
8 p.m. Tuesday, November 19, Saline High School Cafeteria. Regular business meeting. Hosting Genealogy section of Washtenaw Historical Society 2:30 p.m. Sunday, November 17, same place. Open to public.

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Ypsilanti Historical Society--
Annual Christmas Party, 2-5 p.m. Sunday, December 8, at Museum, 220 N. Huron Street (next to City Hall). Musical program with carol singing, refreshments. Display of doll houses arranged by Mrs. George Bird. Museum will be decorated in the Victorian manner. Open to public.

GENEALOGY SECTION MEETS

The Genealogy Section of the Washtenaw Historical Society planned to meet at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, November 17, at the Saline High School Cafeteria, as guests of the new Saline Area Historical Society.

A discussion of ways of going about pursuing family trails, led by Dr. and Mrs. William F. Bender, was planned.

MUNCYS TO SPEAK AT SUNDAY MEETING

Both Ralph and Lydia Muncy will speak on "Educational Developments in America" at 3 p.m. Sunday, November 24, in Liberty Hall at Ann Arbor Federal Savings & Loan, Liberty and Division Streets, Ann Arbor.

The Muncys, long-time members of the Society, bring a varied perspective to their topic. Both have life teaching certificates from the University of Michigan. Lydia has taught in both one-room schools and graded systems in her 30 year career. Ralph, who majored in forestry and conservation of natural resources, has used his skills in various ways including development of academic programs for the Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.) during the depression of the 1930's.

In the Society, the Muncys organized the Genealogy Section last year. Mrs. Muncy also organized a group interested in early crafts. Both have been active in Sesquicentennial activities in Ann Arbor.

Members please note: The November meeting has been planned for Sunday afternoon. If you need a ride call Frank Everett at 663-5723. He will arrange for a fellow member to pick you up. And bring a friend. Guests are welcome.

CORRECTED COPIES

Corrected copies of the October issue of "The Impressions" which was bedeviled by gremlins will be available to those who would like them. Please call Alice Ziegler, 663-8826, and we will arrange to send you one.

CIRCUS IN U.S. BEGAN AS ONE-RING SHOW IN 1793

by Stuart Thayer

Included among those institutions that crossed the Atlantic from England fully grown is that of the circus. It came to America via a Scotsman, John Bill Ricketts, who emigrated in 1792 to establish a riding school in Philadelphia. In the month of April, 1793 he opened the first true circus in America on the same spot, the southwest corner of Market and Twelfth Streets. In referring to this as the first true circus I am defining the genre as a multi-act performance, i.e. one having several performers each of whom did a different presentation. In addition to Ricketts' own riding this first program included his brother, Francis, as an acrobat; a rope-dancer by the name of Spinacuta and a clown, M. McDonald. There was even an apprentice, a boy named Strobach, who stood on Ricketts' shoulders in a riding act called "Flying Mercury".

The presentation of equestrian feats had been accomplished as far back as Roman times and saddled riding, such as Ricketts offered, was seen in America as early as 1771. But it was Ricketts who combined various types of entertainment that had theretofore been seen individually in this country. He was able to do this, I would hypothesize, because he had experience of it in England where he had performed for Charles Hughes at the Royal Circus near Blackfriar's Bridge. Also, he could afford the cost of the building in which the entertainment was presented.

The actual development of what we, and Ricketts, call the circus was accomplished by Philip Astley, a former dragoon whose riding ability so astonished onlookers at his riding school in Lambeth that he fenced off his yard and began charging admission. In a short time he added other types of entertainers, the same sort that Ricketts had, and so became what historians refer to as the father of the circus. This was in the year 1769, according to most sources.

Ricketts' building in Philadelphia was wooden, probably circular, since subsequent ones definitely were, and was centered by the circle, what we call the ring. The audience either stood in the pit area surrounding the ring or sat on benches in the boxes which were raised three or four feet above the level of the ground. At this time it is our belief that the arena was open to the sky.

This beginning effort was quite successful. Ricketts played for four months in Philadelphia and then moved to New York where he performed for another three months. He quite possibly anticipated his success since he knew of that of his English predecessors, but certainly the fact that his was the first such entertainment offered in this country must not be overlooked.

Let us take a moment to describe what we know of the performances in those early years. Rope-dancing was as advanced then as it is now, assuming that the feats advertised were performed. The only turn that is done now that was not done then is the somersault. Of the clown's contribution we know very little. It was largely vocal, the hall being small and all parts of it easily reached by the human voice. Acrobatics of a type that might be termed unusual were often reserved to the clown rather than the more formal tricks done by the acrobat himself. Tieing one's feet together and then doing flipflaps is an example; an acrobat would consider such an act beneath him. What the acrobat did offer was what is called today a "carpet act" from the later practise of spreading a bit of carpet on the ground to prevent dirtying the costumes. Cartwheels, somersaults, leaps over various objects and through others, such as hoops and hogsheads, was the standard fare. All this was secondary, however, to the principal attraction, the equestrian acts.

We must remember that the people viewing the circus program of that time all owned, rode, stabled and fed horses so they were very aware of them. They appreciated well broken ones and were familiar with

their limitations. Thus, they were astounded by what riders like Ricketts were able to do while standing on the beasts backs. They had no experience of seeing horses used in such a manner. Perhaps we would be as surprised to see a man tap dancing on the roof of a passing automobile.

As the horse circled inside the low fence that was the ring boundary the rider would leap obstacles and land again upon the saddle. Ribbons, canes and banners were the usual hurdles, it becoming a mark of skill to leap wider and wider banners. The balloon, or paper covered hoop, was introduced in the early years and provided a satisfactory clap of noise as the rider burst it in one of his leaps. Ricketts in his early presentations would leap from his moving horse to earth and back again, hang from the horse by one leg so that his hat touched the ground, rode standing on two horses and even did a hornpipe. Later, he added a flag dance and the manual of arms. One of his later specialties, which was a very old act, having been done in Shakespeare's day, was a pyramid of three and even five riders on two horses.

To watch all this the audience payed a dollar for a box or fifty cents to the pit and the program ran about two and one-half hours. The audience was not widely travelled and therefore appreciated the opportunity to be entertained, though there were resentments expressed in church circles against popular entertainment. The Puritans and their successors in thought believed that all effort was to be devoted toward God's Will, and that make-believe was the work of the devil. The theatre, and by association the circus, was make-believe and so those who watched it as well as those who performed were frittering away God-given talents and money in idleness. This admittedly simplified attitude was the basis for what opposition there was to the circus.

The metropolitan centers of Ricketts' day were not large places; New York had a population of 33,000 in 1890; Philadelphia, 45,000; Baltimore, 20,000 and Boston, 18,000. Because of these numbers both the theatre and the circus adopted early on the practise of moving from city to city.

In his second year of operation, 1794, Ricketts took his company to Charleston, Norfolk, Richmond, Alexandria and doubtless other places before appearing again in Philadelphia that September. In subsequent seasons he visited Boston, Hartford, Albany, Providence and Baltimore in the United States and Montreal and Quebec in Canada.

In each of these cities it was necessary to erect an arena and this cost had to be returned from admissions so there had to be the potential for audiences of a certain size in order to make the business profitable. It was the custom to sell the buildings at the end of each stand and the asking price was usually half the value of the materials. In 1798 it cost Ricketts three hundred dollars for the 40,000 board feet of lumber necessary to construct his building. If labor costs were again as much, which is doubtful, it can be seen that an eight hundred capacity hall would return its cost in just a few evenings of shows.

There were failures, of course. We have record of an arena being abandoned after only one or two performances. But we also have such examples as Ricketts' in Montreal in 1798 in which he was so successful he built a stone arena and spent the winter.

Competition appeared in only the second of Ricketts' seasons when he leased his New York building to a proprietor named Thomas Swann. And in 1796 Philip Lailson arrived from France with a troupe that competed with our first impressario for four years. Lailson was not remembered, as was Ricketts. At least we have found no later writers remembering him with the approval they give to Ricketts. We have to assume from quotations from quite a number of sources that Ricketts was an excellent

horseman and that his performances were of high quality. We have no way of determining if he was as proficient as later riders, but we have found not a single derogatory reference to his skill, nor to his personality. George Washington attended several performances and it appears he and Ricketts rode together upon occasion. Ricketts bought a horse from the first president in 1794. Gilbert Stuart painted his portrait as did Thomas Sully, though only the Stuart survives.

In 1799 Ricketts' buildings in New York and Philadelphia both burned and this loss may have bankrupted him. He performed only once more in America, that in April, 1800, just seven years after his first performance. He went to the West Indies for one or two years and from there took ship for England and was lost at sea. This was in 1801 or 1802.

There were others to carry the genre forward. One or two Americans entered the business, but it was dominated by Europeans until the 1820's. There were no great changes in the programs offered in the years just after Ricketts' death. In fact, equestrian acts themselves have seen but little change over the years. A notable exception would be in what I might term ethnic riding, such as the cossacks and the cowboys and the Spanische Reitschule of Vienna have introduced. There were improvements. Ricketts rode saddled horses, though they were not street saddles, but pads about the size of an automobile steering wheel. In time these became larger to accomodate less talented people to the point where one manager remarks in his memoirs that they were the size of sideboards. Then, in 1822, an Englishman named James Hunter introduced bareback riding in America. He rode without saddle or bridle, the horse "in the rude state of nature", as the advertisements had it. Hunter was highly thought of and well received, his skill being such that he was constantly the subject of complimentary reviews. His specialty was quickly copied, of course, and bareback riding became the only acceptable measure of an equestrian's ability. Beyond this, bareback riding led to the introduction of what we call the ring master, it being necessary for someone to control the horse, to keep him at his pace, the rider no longer having reins by which to do this.

Once the ring master was established he also became the foil or, to use the theatrical term, the straight man for the clown. Thus we have the classical trio upon which the circus performance was henceforth based, the rider, the ring master and the clown. With these three and some music any handfull of artists could proclaim themselves a circus and we have record of troupes with little more to them in the way of personnel.

The next important change in the operation of circuses came with the adoption of the canvas tent and the necessary wagons to carry it. At this point we have reached the late 1820's, a sort of watershed in circus history. Prior to this technological change the troupes travelled by horseback or by boat to the principal cities and the salaries of the performers and the dozen or so administrative employees were only paid on the basis of the time they actually worked. But when wagons were introduced the movement of the shows was paced by the speed of horses, some fifteen to twenty miles a day, and those who drove the wagons as well as those who rode along had to be fed whether there was a performance or not. The solution to this, of course, was to perform every day, thus providing a constant income against the constant overhead. From this evolved the practise of one day stands, which has been carried down to our present day. And it is this picture of the caravan moving each day from one town to the next, by wagon, by railroad train, by truck, that nostalgia dotes upon.

In the space of these notes we cannot go into a great deal of detail on the subsequent history of the institution. Let us remark that in the 1870's the adoption of railroad travel ushered in the golden age of the American circus. It was in this period, roughly 1880 to 1920, that the giants of the genre appeared. I

LOCAL HISTORIC PRINT TABLE MATS NOW ON SALE

How would you like to eat your porridge off a copy of an 1874 print of "Henry Binder's Orchestrion Hall", corner of Main and Liberty?

Through the generous contribution of Mrs. Henry Sicinski and others this is now possible. Mrs. Sicinski had four prints from the "New Historical Atlas of Washtenaw County, Michigan" (1874) photographed and made into attractive, washable table mats. The mats are for sale and all proceeds will be given to the museum fund of the Washtenaw County Historical Society.

How did Mrs. Sicinski get involved with turning rare book prints into table mats? Her interest in history developed as she was growing up in Norfolk, Va., not only seeing many historic sites but also hearing those tales from "The War" about how the silver was buried to save it from the Yankees.

Later when she married and set up housekeeping in Ann Arbor, she became an antique collector. Along the way she acquired a copy of the 1874 atlas and became interested in locating the sites of many of the structures pictured.

She also used the atlas to help her daughter's sixth-grade class at Newport School with a Sesquicentennial project. With it she verified the location of James Allen's farm within the Newport School district.

CIRCUS (cont.)

refer to P.T.Barnum, James A.Bailey, Adam Forepaugh and the Ringling Brothers, names that may be familiar to you. It was in this period that the noun circus became a descriptive adjective; when the hyperbole of advertising and the uninhibited claims of grandeur tried to evoke a mysterious and alien wonder in the minds of the populace and largely succeeded.

In time the automobile, the radio and the motion picture intruded to the extent that the circus became just another of several ways to spend one's entertainment dollar and gradually the genre was reduced to a child's entertainment which it seems to remain to this day.

Stuart Thayer of Thayer-Innis Insurance Agency devotes much of his spare time to circus history. He is president of the Circus History Association, a national group of 1,200 members, and is writing a book on the subject.

A friend, W.E. Britton, photographed the print of the Allen farm in the atlas and Xerox Corp. printed several hundred copies for distribution in the school. It was so successful she thought others would like to have prints from the atlas during the Sesquicentennial year.

Having seen and used mats with historic prints on them, Mrs. Sicinski decided that this was the most attractive way to make the prints available. With the cooperation of William Nuffer of Litho Crafters, Inc., she had plates made of four prints. Mr. Nuffer chose "Birds Eye View of Delhi Mills" which gives in great detail every industry and home in the village. Mrs. Sicinski chose the others because of certain associations with the scenes.

The second print, "Ann Arbor Steam Planing Mill", corner of North and Fifth Streets in Ann Arbor, is the building which has been made into Kerrytown II. The mill was owned by Luick Brothers & Co. and Mrs. Sicinski counts among her friends Mr. Waldo Luick who has told her many stories about old Ann Arbor.

The third print of the "Washtenaw County Poor House & Insane Asylum" interested her because of her background in hospital work as a nurse-anesthetist. The area behind the "Poor House" (site of the Washtenaw County Farm) is still used for Project Grow gardens.

The last one is a combination of prints of two buildings which have vanished--an interior view of Henry Binder's Orchestrion Hall, where the Hutzel Building now stands, and a view of the rich Second Empire style architecture of the City Market, which stood on the corner of Fourth and Washington Streets.

Edwards Letter Shop, Inc., reproduced the prints in a sepia tone. Ulrich's donated the laminating materials and the work was done with the cooperation of Mrs. Joyce Keith of the Graphics Department of the Ann Arbor Public School Administration Office.

The table mats, available in sets of four, may be ordered directly from Mrs. Sicinski (769-3726). Each table mat is $2.50, or $10 for four. Some prints have been left unlaminated and are $1.50 each.

The mats will be for sale at the next Historical Society meeting. They also may be purchased at Hutzel's Apparel Shop, Finishing Touch Antiques Shop, London Flower Shop, Kitchen Port, and Ruth Roy Interiors.

Washtenaw
Historical Society
Meeting
Sunday November 24, 1974
3:00 P.M.
LIBERTY HALL
ANN ARBOR FEDERAL SAVINGS
LIBERTY AT DIVISION

Miss Eileen Hartison
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PASS NEWSLETTER ON

How about passing your copy of "The Impressions" on to a friend and inviting him or her to join the Society?

The fall membership drive is underway and the help of Society members would be appreciated. The coupon, a duplicate of the membership card, may be mailed to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Lacy, 1832 Vinewood Blvd., Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104.

THE WASHTENAW HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Date_____

I wish to apply for_____membership in the Washtenaw Historical Society.

(Dues for active individual membership are $3.00; for husband and wife $5.00 and $50.00 for life membership.)

My check is enclosed.

Name_____Phone_____

Address_____

_____

Interest or Occupation_____

_____

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Lacy, 1832 Vinewood Blvd. Ann Arbor, Michigan